

Older persons

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Key points

- Do not assume older persons are visible; actively identify them
- Consult older persons to identify their needs and capacities as well as shortcomings in protection and assistance programmes
- Consult older persons to determine the content of food and CRI packages and make sure they can access distribution mechanisms

1. Overview

An older person is defined by the United Nations as a person who is over 60 years of age. However, families and communities often use other socio-cultural referents to define age, including family status (grandparents), physical appearance, or age-related health conditions. The psychological and psychosocial toll of traumatic experiences, combined with poor nutrition and exposure to disease, can cause refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to 'age' faster than settled populations. As a consequence, many challenges associated with old age will be apparent in refugees and internally displaced persons who are under 60. Where life expectancy is low, people in their 50s may be considered older and this may be reflected in national policy.

The needs and capacities of older persons are often overlooked in an emergency response because humanitarian actors do not register their presence or because of their weak socio-economic position. An emergency response that fully includes older persons must identify the protection risks older persons face, dedicate resources to mitigate them, and plan and implement targeted protection initiatives in close consultation with the persons concerned, their communities, and service providers.

2. Main guidance

1) Protection objectives

- To identify older persons and protection risks they face and assess their needs and capacities from the start of an emergency and throughout.
- To ensure that protection and assistance programmes are inclusive of older persons and that services are accessible to them on an equal footing.
- To ensure that older persons do not suffer discrimination and are able to fully participate in decisions that affect them and their communities.
- To ensure that all responses are inclusive and accessible to older persons, and consider their priorities and specific needs, by applying an age, gender, and diversity (AGD) lens.
- To ensure that appropriate systems are in place to prevent and respond to violence against older persons during an emergency and their exploitation or abuse.
- To recognize and build on the capacities, skills, and resources of older persons.

2) Underlying principles and standards

- UNHCR, [Policy on age, gender and diversity](#), 2018. The policy reinforces UNHCR's commitment to ensure that people are at the centre of all that we do. It consolidates commitments to a strong [Age, Gender and Diversity](#) orientation, [accountability to affected people \(AAP\)](#) and to women and girls. It defines six areas of engagement and ten mandatory core actions for all UNHCR operations and headquarters.
- UNHCR, [Policy on Older Refugees](#), 2000. Older women and men have the same basic needs as others but become increasingly vulnerable as a result of ageing. Older persons face particular challenges during the phases of displacement, but should not be seen as passive, dependent recipients of assistance. They are often community leaders and transmit knowledge, culture, skills, and crafts. UNHCR and partners must ensure their rights are met without discrimination.
- UNHCR, [Need to Know Guidance: Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement](#), 2021. Provides practical guidance on how to protect the rights of displaced and stateless older persons and prevent discrimination.

3) Protection Risks

- Older persons are often less mobile; their sight and hearing may fail; their psychosocial capacities and muscle strength may diminish; they may have chronic health problems and specific nutritional needs.
- Forcibly displaced older persons are at heightened risk of violence, including elder abuse, sexual and domestic abuse; exploitation by family members; discrimination and accusations of witchcraft; and exclusion from access to humanitarian assistance, education, livelihoods, health care, a nationality, and other services. These risks may be heightened for older women, older persons with disabilities, and older LGBTI persons.
- Unaccompanied older persons face particular challenges in emergency situations: to find adequate accommodation, protect their belongings, and obtain water, rations and fuel.
- In emergency situations, family members may be separated or die, leaving older persons without traditional forms of family support. Older persons may also become the main caregivers for their grandchildren.
- The above risks may be heightened in non-camp settings and new displacement contexts,

where the community is dispersed, and community protection mechanisms may no longer function.

4) Other risks

- Any failure to protect the security of displaced and stateless persons will create heightened risks for older persons.
- The reputation of UNHCR and its partners will be put at risk if they do not fulfil their responsibility to protect all displaced and stateless persons, including older persons.

5) Key decision points

- At the beginning of an emergency, consider the needs of older persons when you design shelter and settlement options, select sites, and plan and design infrastructure. Ensure minimum standards of access and ensure that emergency distributions take steps to address the barriers that older persons might face.
- Respond at once and adequately to the specific needs of older persons and make sure that they have access to day-to-day care.
- Ensure that older persons are identified, registered and their needs assessed.
- Ensure that services and infrastructure are physically accessible to older persons, in particular to those with limited mobility.
- Establish referral systems to ensure that older persons can access relevant service providers. Enhance systems to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation, and abuse, so they can also address elder abuse and targeted violence against older persons.
- Make sure that programmes include older persons, and that older persons are adequately informed about programmes they are entitled to access.
- Make sure that staff, partners, and local and national authorities recognize the specific needs of older persons and know how to respond to them.
- Ensure older persons can participate in the protection of their families and communities.
- Particularly in non-camp settings, it is very important to establish an outreach programme, through selected partners, to identify older persons and keep them informed of matters that concern them.

6) Key steps

Support services and care arrangements

- In camps, and at local and national level, identify service providers and potential partners who have specific expertise (medical, psychological, social support) and capacity to respond immediately.
- In consultation with older persons, and service providers and partners, agree coordination mechanisms and set up clear arrangements for referring older persons to support services.
- Prioritize older persons in family reunification efforts. Do not separate them from family members or support persons, or their assistive devices, adaptive aids, or medication (notably during relocation or transport).
- Consult the displaced community to identify what support arrangements exist for older persons who are alone (and therefore have no support networks), care for children, or who are living in an abusive household.

- Identify male and female volunteers in the displaced or local community (community workers) who can be trained to assist older persons and their families.
- Conduct training and capacity building activities for partners and local service providers.

Identification and assessment procedures

- Assign community workers, UNHCR protection staff or community-based protection staff to (pre-)registration points or arrival areas to identify and register older persons who have disabilities; injuries; chronic illnesses; are survivors of abuse and neglect; are unaccompanied; are the sole caregivers of children.
- Appoint male and female community workers, or request partners, to screen camps and settlements for older persons with specific needs who may not have been present at (pre)registration. (Older people often face problems in accessing registration points). Older persons who have registered may be useful sources of information.
- Include specific questions about older persons in rapid and participatory assessments. Seek to identify their priorities and any obstacles they encounter in accessing assistance. Ask older persons which forms of assistance and which referral mechanisms they find most appropriate and accessible.
- Train registration staff, and provide guidance, on how to identify and record older persons with specific needs (who have not yet registered in [ProGres](#), UNHCR's corporate registration, identity and case management tool).
- Enter the specific needs of older persons into ProGres using the dedicated Specific Needs Codes for Older person at risk (SP-ER), in combination with others when relevant (e.g., SNCs - Disability).

Access to services

- Identify households with older persons who are not mobile or who cannot move easily. In consultation with them, locate them close to facilities and services when assigning plots and shelters.
- In consultation with male and female older persons, design or adapt medical centers, distribution sites, water sources, latrines, shelters, and other infrastructures so that they are safe, accessible, and appropriate for older persons. (They should not have barriers or tripping hazards, and should have ramp access, large doorways, handrails on stairs, non-slippery floors, etc.).
- Ensure that older persons can access food or non-food item distributions. Monitor this issue. Take steps to facilitate their access where necessary. For example, you might create separate queues, provide transport, give out smaller parcels, or offer 'home delivery'. Work with health and nutrition partners to identify any specific dietary needs of older persons.
- Consult older persons when deciding what items should be included in distributions (for example, smaller jerrycans) and when designing new infrastructure. Consulting at the start can avoid expensive alterations later on.

Prevention of abuse and exploitation

- Include older persons in all mechanisms that prevent and respond to elder abuse, [sexual exploitation and abuse \(PSEA\)](#) and [gender-based violence \(GBV\)](#).

- Through community workers and other partners, monitor and follow-up older persons who are at higher risk of abuse or exploitation. Include referral mechanisms.
- Inform and train older persons, and community workers, on how to recognize, prevent, and report instances of violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Inclusion and information sharing

- Displaced populations should receive key messages in a range of accessible formats, including by radio, word of mouth, in information booklets, and in 'easy to read' formats (text and symbols/images).
- Involve older persons and their caregivers in decision-making and programming. Include them in the design, assessment, monitoring, and evaluation of activities.

Awareness-raising and advocacy

- Inform staff and partners of the rights of older persons. Emphasize that responses need to be designed in consultation with older persons so that they are inclusive and accessible.
- Train UNHCR and partner personnel on how to integrate the priorities and the specific needs of older persons in programmes and activities.
- Advocate for the inclusion of older persons in national policies and programmes, including in national social protection systems.

Participation

- Include older persons in livelihood activities. When identifying livelihood and training opportunities, take account of their experience, interests, and abilities.
- Include older persons in community-based mechanisms, such as refugee and women's committees.
- Consult with communities to understand the leadership roles of older persons and ensure these are strengthened and not undermined.
- Identify roles for older persons in supporting programming. Include inter-generational initiatives. (For example, older people can volunteer in child and youth programmes.)

7) Key management considerations

- Resources and sufficient staff must be available to meet the specific needs of older persons. Assess programmes regularly to ensure they are AGD inclusive.
- Set up a monitoring mechanism for all key steps.
- To make this work sustainable, ensure that government services and other national partners are fully and continuously engaged in programmes and support for older persons.

8) Resources and partnerships

Staff

- Key sectors include protection, community-based protection, and mental health and psychosocial support.

Financial resources

- Financial resources will be required to plan and implement relevant services, interventions, and programmes. This may include budget lines for accessibility, adaptations, and assistive devices. These will also benefit other groups, such as persons with disabilities.

Partnerships

- UN Agencies, INGOs and national NGOs, including organizations of older persons, and government institutions, including relevant ministries. Partners will often be able to provide mental health and psychosocial support, where required.

Annexes

[UNHCR, Need to know Guidance - Working with older persons in forced displacement, 2021](#)

[UNHCR, Tip Sheet on applying the UNHCR age, gender, diversity policy to Older Persons, 2021](#)

3. Learning and field practices

[UNHCR, A claim to dignity: Ageing on the move, 2023](#)

4. Links

[Age and Disability Consortium, Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for older people... WHO, Abuse of older people, 2022](#)

5. Main contacts

As first port of call, contact the UNHCR Deputy Representative (Protection), the UNHCR Assistant Representative (Protection), or the Senior Protection Officer or Senior Community-based Protection Officer in the country.

Alternatively, contact the UNHCR Head of Protection, or the Deputy Director (Protection), or the senior Protection Coordinator, or the senior Protection Officer, or the senior Community-based Protection Officer in the Regional Bureau. The person you contact will liaise as required with the relevant technical unit at UNHCR DIP.